



CHRONICLE OF THE STELLAR BRIDGES

RAÚL SANZ GARCÍA

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Translated by the author

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Introduction: An Anonymous Narrator

THE EVENTS RECOUNTED in this chronicle were gathered by me over many years. Some of them—I will not say which—I lived through myself; others were told to me by those who took part in them, or by someone who heard the tale from them. The rest I have pieced together from documents found in a thousand places. What I present here takes a literary form; perhaps only in this guise, as fiction, can it be believed. Otherwise, the story is so extraordinary—and so tangled; I will not deny having filled in the gaps to the very edge of plausibility—that no one would take it for anything more than a collection of inventions and forgeries.

It would be too much to say that what is told here changed history. But what is history, in an age when the solitude of human-kind on its tiny planet has shattered forever? Countless histories lie ahead, and many will never learn of one another, remembered only by a handful of adventurers whose separation from the human lineage will fade into the mists of a past as vast as it is unreachable—as was the time of the first of our kind. But that will come, if it comes, in the future. For now, we stand *only* at the beginning.

My name I keep to myself. I leave the reader the pleasure of guessing who I am in this chronicle—if indeed I am named at all.

A NEW EARTH

BOOK ONE



This day before dawn I ascended a hill and look'd at the crowded
heaven,
And I said to my spirit *When we become the enfolders of those orbs
and the pleasure
and the knowledge of everything in them, shall we be fill'd and
satisfied then?*
And my spirit said *No, we but level that lift to pass and continue
beyond.*

Walt Whitman (1819-1892)
Song of Myself, 46

1. GÁNDOR

AARÓN CORVO FELT his body grow lighter. He let himself sway as he had done before, but this time he did not rise, and the metal panels around him did not fade. Freshly awake, the weight of sleep still pressed on him. It took a few moments to register the blackout: gravity was at zero, the only light a faint glow through the skylight. The solar storm must have been fierce to cause such silence.

He pulled himself up and pushed off toward the door. Through the small porthole he made out a reddish glare seeping through the ventilation panels at the end of the corridor. Under these conditions, nearly all reserves would be funneled into the single vital process: breathing. Nothing in the station moved. The centralized lockdown kept every prisoner sealed in while the staff sheltered somewhere safe. Corvo reckoned the next transport was due in five days or so, but if the power did not return, they would be hard-pressed to last that long. All he could do was wait—and trust that if things got worse, there was an evacuation plan.

Locked inside a remote chunk of rock in the Frigg system, they orbited a gas giant whose shadow did nothing to soften the lashings of that wayward sun. The only way out was the regular line to the citadel of Merga, the largest and most habitable of Gross's moons. Apart from the small missions exploring Frigg, those two were the farthest permanent settlements humanity had ever established. They lay on the far side of the Omega Bridge—one of the three viable stellar routes discovered so far.

Corvo had been held there for two years. Before that, he had never left Earth—yet he knew the interstellar missions well. As an engineer, he had worked on designing processors capable of handling the massive calculations required to locate bridges. It was, quite literally, like finding a needle in millions of haystacks. Against his will, that work had pulled him into the shadow world of federal security. Leaking information about the research was punishable by imprisonment and selective amnesia—a procedure whose side effects belied its promised precision. But the best minds were never wasted. If someone fell under suspicion, their skills were preserved and they were locked away in some unreachable place, forced to

keep working. The scientific station of Gándor, run exclusively by the Western Federation, was ideal for that purpose. There, the coordinates of vast regions of the universe beyond Earth's reach were processed in secret.

In those moments of waiting, the engineer recalled how his fate had been sealed the instant he chose his field. Had he pursued any other path, they would never have come for him. From the start, they had known about his subversive leanings, his interest in parties deemed dangerous and tied to illegal groups. Though he had never joined any of those factions, his mere proximity to certain people had been enough to tip the scales. Risks had to be minimized, and making someone disappear was not difficult. On an overpopulated Earth, thousands of names were erased every day with no one to claim them.

At least he was lucky to be alive—and not in bad shape. He lived in an austere but clean single cell; the food was adequate; he had a few hours of leisure to spend in the simulation rooms or alone. On Earth he was officially a missing person. That gave him some hope of returning one day, even with half his brain burned out. But it was just as likely that once he outlived his usefulness, they would dispose of him without a second thought. The uncertainty and the utter isolation had worn him down, body and soul. The mirror returned the image of a gaunt man: a face clinging to bone beneath an unkempt beard, eyes ringed with shadow. The physical distance had severed him from human affairs. Everything he had once cared about now seemed a distant, insignificant clamor beside the mute immensity of the universe.

That was his daily landscape—the horizon stretching toward the far reaches of Frigg, whose spectral echoes drifted on, indifferent to the station's artificial schedule. It was the clock that pulled him from his thoughts. Breakfast time had come and gone, and still nothing stirred. He was used to long stretches without food, so he decided to save the ration bars he kept for later. All he really wanted was a cup of coffee—but the way to the mess hall was sealed.

Or was it?

A faint click sounded on the other side of the door. He looked out and saw a guard walking through the dim glow of the emergency

lamps. If the power had not returned, it was strange for anyone to be out there. The man approached his door with great care and worked the lock. When it opened, Corvo found himself facing a familiar figure—a maintenance technician he had passed a couple of times in the corridors. His presence here made no sense. There was no overlap between their duties. If someone had been sent for him, it should have been security.

“We have to leave,” the man said. Nothing more.

Corvo’s stillness was itself a demand for explanation. The guard had come prepared:

“An ISF ship is waiting outside. You have no future here. I’m offering you freedom.”

“In exchange for...”

The situation was too strange to take the man at his word. How could the ISF know where he was and have planted someone inside the station? And clearly they were not taking these risks just to set him free. Back on Earth, he had attended a few assemblies of the Sphere, the association of non-governmental circles. There, someone claiming to work with the ISF—*Interstellar Freedom*—had told him they were very interested in meeting him. He never heard from them again. A week later, federal agents arrested him. That slip—deliberate or not—had landed him straight in Gándor.

Even so, he held no grudge. The only feeling that had taken root in him was indifference—not even contempt, just a plain, quiet apathy. He had long since stopped caring about the ISF and its heroic plans to open the stellar routes. Earth was full of dreamers promising paradise on some distant planet. What difference was there between religious fanatics and those fighters who championed humanity as if it were the body of a god?

He also knew that if he crossed that threshold, he would become a fugitive with no horizon but endless flight. There would be no second chances. He had neither the strength nor the will to move—but his weakness was not born of fear. And that was what made him see it: if he stayed, he would wither away for good. He would have to force himself. Go against his body, against his will.

The guard turned and walked on. Corvo, buoyed by the lightness of zero gravity, dragged himself after him.

They moved through pitch darkness along the station's secondary corridors—passages no prisoner ever set foot in. Switching on a light or using any guidance device was out of the question. If power returned, the surveillance systems would trigger an alarm at the first unexpected signal; their bodies would be detected soon after. The guard led him with precision to a small hatch set into a rocky wall: a disused conduit from when this module had been fitted into the hillside. Go down there, and they would come out into the raw open air of Gándor. On the other side, the man explained, an ISF vehicle was waiting.

Dizzy from the low oxygen in that section, Corvo watched as if in a dream while the metal shaft sank into darkness. No longer able to coordinate his movements, he let his rescuer take hold of him and slide him feet-first into the tube.

He landed softly on a padded surface.

Before him, the gray and blue rocks of the moon dissolved into a violet horizon where ghosts seemed to dance. It struck him then: this was the first time in his life he had stood in the open beyond Earth. Since leaving it, he had passed from capsule to capsule, never breathing anything but recycled air from ventilation grilles. But no wind stirred on this moon. A piercing cold crept over him, and he began to feel the foulness of the atmosphere. Something covered him just as he lost consciousness.

He woke lying in a recovery pod in a small medical bay. Warm lights and a breeze that carried the scent of rain. Someone turned toward him.

“You’re very weak. Didn’t they feed you in Gándor?” said a slight woman with short dark hair, adjusting some hidden panels.

Slowly, Corvo came back to himself, but he had no strength to speak. He simply gazed at the kind face examining him.

“My name is Aura. We’re aboard an ISF ship, somewhere between Gándor and Merga. Feeling better?”

The engineer nodded. It was as though, in the blink of an eye, his life had changed completely. He knew nothing about where he was going—yet he felt certain this uncertainty was infinitely better than what he had left behind.

There was no sense of movement. The stars hung motionless beyond the porthole, guiding their course—a short haul compared

to the interstellar leap that crossed the vastness between suns. If they counted in Earth cycles, as all outer stations did, it would still be two or three days before they arrived.

He tried to move and felt a pain in his side. There was a dressing there. He could guess why.

“The locator was buried deep,” Aura explained. “We’ve disabled it. Your body will absorb it on its own.”

They gave him civilian clothes and a protein gel, but it was the coffee that truly brought him back.

When he entered the control room, he found the ship’s four crew members. He already knew Aura and the guard, whose name was Resa. The other two introduced themselves: Daniel Acero, a short, broad-shouldered man with straw-colored hair who greeted him with an easy smile; and Nezda, an athletic woman with a face of strange, blended beauty—olive skin, pale slanted eyes, black hair streaked with auburn. None of them claimed to be captain or commander, but the two women carried themselves with more authority than their companions: Aura through soft, measured words; Nezda through blunt remarks laced with irony.

“So this is the ISF,” said Nezda. “What did you expect?”

“An hour ago I wasn’t expecting anything.”

“There’s more to it, obviously,” Aura said with a faint smile, “but now isn’t the time. I imagine you want to know why you’re here.”

“I can guess. What I didn’t expect is that anyone outside the federations could work with hypercoordinates.”

“We have our resources,” said Nezda. “Didn’t expect us to spring you either, did you?”

“It was planned to the last detail,” Acero put in. He spoke with a frankness so guileless it bordered on naïve. “There was a high chance of the storm—”

“And where’s your search equipment?” the engineer cut in.

“Somewhere in another star system,” Nezda shot back, matching his tone. Her manner had nothing of her companions’ courtesy.

“If we turned to you,” Aura said, stepping in, “it’s because your help is essential. We know that some time ago you were close to us—and that it was our fault you ended up in Gándor. Believe me, that was never our intention. But you must understand how hard

it is to keep federal security's reach from touching everything. We won't force you to work for the Sphere. At the very least, you walk away free—that way we settle our debt. If you decide to go your own way, we'll leave you in Merga, in neutral territory.”

Corvo knew that a fugitive with almost nothing stood no chance beyond Earth. The deal was plain: they would protect him and give him the means to stay hidden; he would help with their search. Accepting was inevitable—at least he could tell himself it was self-interest, not ideals he did not share.

“You can drop the formal address,” he said. “Your friend already has.”

Nezda made no effort to hide her wariness; her gaze held a quiet challenge. Far from unsettling him, he found it more honest than Aura's warmth. After all, he did not belong to the ISF's inner circle—they wanted him for his technical skills, nothing more. However much they apologized for past mistakes, a man who had turned his back on every cause might not deserve such treatment. No doubt they had looked into his past and decided this was the way to play it. He, on the other hand, knew nothing about the situation he had been thrown into. For a start, he found it hard to believe there was no other specialist in the whole Solar System they could have turned to. He could not shake the suspicion that if they had gone to such lengths to free him, there had to be something more.

He kept those doubts to himself and let things unfold. In any case, the role of indispensable man suited him well enough.

“So which star are we heading for—the Sun or Suria? I take it you don't keep your observatories in that damned hell.”

“No permanent installation is viable in the Hades system, as you well know,” Aura replied. Her gentleness was a deliberate foil to his bluntness.

“Both,” Nezda said, and that was that.

So it was clear. They would go to Suria—but the jump had to be made from the Solar System, through the Alpha Bridge: the first interstellar route ever opened and still the most traveled. For now, that was all they meant to tell him. Corvo did not push. He had no real interest in the organization's hidden plans. He would give them what they asked; he trusted they would do the same.

It took two more days to reach Merga. During the trip he barely exchanged a word with the others. Of the four, Acero was the most open and trusting, but he spent most of his time at the helm. Nezda could handle nearly every system on the ship and served as his backup; her skill and her speech both pointed to a military background. The most enigmatic was Resa—a methodical, cold man whom it was easy to picture surviving long stretches under a false identity, as he had done in Gándor.

The engineer kept himself busy reviewing a set of hypercoordinate files they had given him. From what he could tell, they had been calculated on outdated processors. With that level of technology, finding anything like a pattern would have been impossible. Nothing compared to the vaults of the Gándor observatory, which simulated a miniature cosmic order in motion. He assumed the Sphere must have something similar, even on a smaller scale; otherwise there was no hope for them.

But something in those samples struck him as odd. There were disconnected fragments whose metadata suggested they belonged to one or more complex patterns. Statistical analysis had flagged them as products of chance or anomalies—not unusual in itself. Among stellar-map simulations, it was normal to find structures that seemed to form meaningful shapes, the way a paint-spattered wall can look like a face. Yet his experience made him suspect these data might have a different origin. The style of the figures bore no resemblance to what artificial searchers produced; not even the latest federation models generated anything like them—only far cruder configurations. Just one thing, he thought, could explain it. Though perhaps it was nothing but his imagination. In any case, the results were far too sparse to warrant faith in some extraordinary intuition that reached beyond calculation.

2. MERGA

THAT WARM LIGHT reminded him of Earth, and for an instant he believed he was there. After Merga's dawn came Frigg—the majestic sun whose calm presence belied its reputation for sudden fury. According to Acero's last report, the solar storm had ended the day before. That meant the news of his escape would have reached every corner of the system by now. Corvo had no idea how the ISF planned to get him into the citadel. He assumed the ship must carry some form of diplomatic immunity—the Sphere's influence stretched at least that far. Another possibility was that they would use powerful inhibitors to slip through an unmonitored route. He would find out soon enough.

The texture of brown rock was already visible. Scratches widened into broad canyons, broken only by the enormous craters scattered across that moon—nearly the size of Mars. In one of its valleys, small pockets of underground water had been found; together with an atmosphere that would not kill you outright, they had made Merga fit for settlement. The Citadel was home to four thousand people from every nation. Its structure clung to the valley walls, and along its length a row of pillars held up a permeable barrel vault that filtered the outside climate and made the interior livable. From the air it looked like a white cylinder sunk into the earth. The center was neutral ground; the two ends, which had stretched over time, belonged to the Western and Eastern Federations respectively. Beyond the valley, scattered around the citadel but linked to it, lay other installations—mostly greenhouses and cosmodromes.

They used exactly the methods Corvo had imagined. First they approached orbit through a quiet sector and deployed navigation inhibitors that hid their presence from the patrols. Had they run into any, the officers would have suggested landing in federal territory. Faced with the threat of a search, they would have produced their credentials as a Sphere diplomatic vessel. Mere suspicion of harboring a fugitive was not enough to override that protection—not without a warrant from the Terrestrial Justice Convention, and that could not arrive for days: the time it would take federal cruisers to carry the news back and forth. So they had just enough time

to refuel at Merga and prepare for their next jump. Whether the Convention would even grant such a warrant, given that the prisoner had been held without trial, was another matter—but that was a slim hope. The great institutions were all in the federations' pockets; they bent the rules as they pleased. For a case this small, they would have had no trouble fabricating a story that checked out.

Fortunately, they were not intercepted. They reached the neutral cosmodrome without incident and found a berth among scientific, exploratory, and supply vessels, many of which lacked interstellar jump capability like the ISF's *Narval*. During preparations for the jump, no one could stay aboard—an inconvenience for Corvo, who knew there were a thousand hidden eyes out there tracking everyone who moved through the station. They put him up in a nearby block of narrow cabins leased by the Sphere. Officially, the *Narval* belonged to that organization, and its crew spoke in its name. The ISF itself was little more than a rumored entity whose public existence was a myth promoted by its members and denied by its enemies—even when those enemies knew it was real.

From his new confinement, the engineer could see part of a transit lane traveled ceaselessly by magnetic vehicles—more than he had glimpsed on his previous visit to Merga. Back then he had entered through the western cosmodrome and spent a week in isolation before being shipped off to Gándor. He knew that inside the citadel lay a small world requiring not just scientists, technicians, and soldiers, but also people to produce food and medicine, to run essential services—healthcare, but also leisure. Yet for all its apparent self-sufficiency, the citadel could not survive long without support from Earth. Regular convoys arrived carrying goods and also communications that, at the speed of light, would have taken centuries to cross the void. Interstellar travel followed a fixed route linking the Solar and Frigg systems: the Omega Bridge, the second to be discovered after the Alpha Bridge between the Sun and the star Suria. Because the heavens never stopped moving, the routes had to be constantly updated—no great difficulty once the patterns that let you punch through space with a massive burst of energy were known. The hard part, as Aarón Corvo knew all too well, was finding those patterns and stitching them together to trace the exact

geometry of the journey. That required mapping a large enough region of the universe in fine detail, then matching every point against trillions of others. Knowledge of astronomical bodies—size, motion, gravitational pull—was essential. If you tried to jump blind from any random point in space, you would most likely blow apart on the spot; failing that, you would end up stranded in some barren nowhere with no way back, because the return coordinates had to be calculated just as precisely.

What almost no one knew was that until very recently, artificial minds had been unable to detect routes without a staggering dose of luck. Only five years earlier had the technology finally been refined enough to find a new bridge: the Hades Bridge, named for the hell that robotic probes had found on the other side. Half the missions never came back; the rest returned with data that left no doubt—survival there was impossible. The question, then, was this: how had the Suria and Frigg bridges been detected eighty-nine and fifty-nine years ago? Nearly everyone on Earth believed it was thanks to the genius of Adán Deleda, the astrophysicist and mathematician whose algorithms had ushered in the new era. But then why had so much time passed between those discoveries and the Hades Bridge? Any specialist knew that Deleda had only laid the groundwork for something that bore fruit much later. With the technology of his day, finding routes would have taken a miracle—and it still nearly did. In a world drowning in information, a small truth could easily be smeared and buried under every kind of fraud, fantasy, and delusion. That was why no one who cared about their standing went digging into those riddles. Corvo, though—for all his distaste for conspiracy talk—knew that the truth lay hidden beneath federal secrecy and a fine story about the triumph of human science.

During those days of waiting, he had little to do but turn over the tales that the ISF's strange data had stirred up. He had no clearance to go outside and hardly any visitors. On one occasion Nezda brought him some food, and Corvo seized the chance to throw her an unexpected question:

“Is there a duid somewhere?”

She looked at him for a few seconds. Just when it seemed she might snap, she shrugged.

“Who knows. Heard they spotted a flying pig over the North Pole, too.”

“I don’t find that so hard to believe. Eastern bioengineers can pull off anything—didn’t they put wings on a rat?”

“Yeah, but I don’t think it flew. Chicken wings, probably.”

Nezda was tough; sarcasm was her armor. And yet—perhaps for that very reason—she showed an unshakable loyalty and stubbornness. Corvo understood her wariness perfectly. It must have come from too many run-ins with strangers whose indifference or cowardice had put her cause at risk. That was why he liked her. He preferred her directness to those who wrapped themselves in slippery words just to stay hidden.

The ISF woman was studying the engineer in turn. She knew he was a key piece in their plans, but he had spent too long working under federal authority. She was only getting close to him because they had insisted that, despite everything, he could be trusted. They knew him; they had his file; they were seldom wrong. Even so, she had no intention of letting her guard down, and no desire to feed his curiosity. He had been brought on as a technician. Nothing more.

“By the way—I spotted an H out there. Have they spread this far?” Corvo nodded toward a ship visible through his cabin window. On its hull, a small red logo: a cross with an H superimposed.

“Humeides? They’re everywhere. Especially out here. Hunting for which planet holds the Kingdom of God.”

“Where do they get their ships?”

“Rich friends,” Nezda said.

Corvo could not help stealing glances at her. For a man who had spent two years locked up, that woman—her feline movements—was a sight no simulation could come close to. She was surely aware of it, yet she did not seem to mind, so he drew the conversation out a little longer.

“Do they preach inside the citadel?”

“Not that I know of. Everything here’s very formal. Nothing like Cirus.”

“I’ve never crossed the Alpha Bridge.”

“All sorts end up there. Much more... lively. They’ve even got flies.”

The engineer smiled. *Flies will conquer space*—he remembered his father telling him that as a child, recounting the story of “The Astronaut Fly”.

Nezda left without a goodbye. From outside came the mingled sounds of machines moving through the hangars. Corvo stepped out cautiously and looked around from the entrance to his section. No one walked across the grid of gray slabs; the only people in sight were behind the glass of vehicles. Where did they all go when their shift ended? Did they gather somewhere in that little city of asphalt and metal, under a ceiling painted to look like Earth’s sky? Another option was a trip outside. Anyone who wanted could rent a rover and head out into the Mergan badlands—a harsh, acidic terrain where neither animal nor plant could survive without technological help, beneath an eternally gray and dusty sky that let through only a few of Frigg’s rays. Was this humanity’s fate beyond its own planet? The obsession with stellar bridges was not just about visiting new stars. What was the point if most of them were no better than Hades? Perhaps vast deposits of raw minerals—but exploiting them was within reach of only a few. Besides, Earth’s people already had plenty from the wealth extracted across the Solar System. No—what they were searching for was something else. Another blue sky. Clean, rich soil that could hold the roots of plants. Breathable air that did not force you to live indoors.

And water. Above all, water.

In the settlements beyond Earth, not a single microdrop was wasted. Every process was calibrated to the millimeter so that water was used only when strictly necessary. Corvo had a simple *metabol* that fed him data on his body. Right now he felt thirsty—but the device knew his hydration levels and told him it was not yet time to consume his daily ration. Perhaps his thirst was not for water.

The waiting hours fell slowly under the white, even light. Corvo would have preferred something dimmer, but these lamps could not be adjusted like the ones in his Gándor cell. His cabin had no comforts; it was designed only to give temporary rest to technicians servicing their own ships. Any vessel scheduled for an interstellar jump had to be inspected down to the last detail—a badly calibrated instrument, a slight weakness in the hull, and you had a disaster.

Normally those checks and the energy loading took a day or two, unless the ship needed major repairs, as seemed to be the case with the *Narval*. Then again, it was also possible nothing unusual was wrong and the ISF members were simply using the stop for other business. They told him nothing. They just put him there until everything was ready. After four days, Acero came to say they had to leave at once. Corvo found the urgency in his voice odd, but the pilot assured him it was only the pressing nature of their mission.

Back on board, everything looked the way they had left it. These vessels—known as *discals*—were built in shapes optimized for interstellar propulsion, but also for an internal artificial-gravity system that demanded certain symmetries. They were elliptical, like the *Narval*, or circular; flat on the underside, where the gravitational attractors sat, and smooth and domed on top. Even in the vacuum of space, the aerodynamic form helped distribute evenly the massive surge of energy required for the jump. Inside, edges and protrusions were likewise avoided; tactile control panels could be summoned from various positions and dragged elsewhere as needed. All systems were accessible from any terminal and could be left open or restricted to authorized users, whose identities were recognized by biological sensors without further credentials. More than manual skill, pilots needed to know and manage a range of navigation programs whose parameters were tweaked throughout the voyage. Other ship types existed—older, more hands-on—but many of them lacked gravity or had only crude devices. If those models wanted to reach other suns, they had to be carried in the holds of enormous discal freighters; that explained the jumble of shapes visible in Merga's cosmodromes.

Once ready, the *Narval* received clearance to move to the launch point. From there it lifted off, wrapped in the rising hum of its engines. Once clear of Merga's gravity they would cut the main drive and return to silence; the ship would then follow a programmed course toward the jump point. That point had been calculated with care at a spot far enough from every celestial body that no gravitational pull could warp the route—which meant heading deep into the outer reaches of the system, several days away. Those legs before and after were the real duration of the trip, because the jump

itself was instantaneous: like slipping through a hole that joined two surfaces at a single shared point in space.

This time it meant six more days added to Aarón Corvo's slow escape. That was how things were out here. Nothing happened at the speed of travel on Earth. A single reckless move could leave you stranded in an immensity beyond all rescue. The ISF crew were used to the risk; they handled everything calmly. The only change was Resa's face, which had shifted until he was, quite literally, another man. That ease of transformation partly explained the blank mask he wore; successive surgeries had stripped him of the gift of expression. For him there was no going back. He would never recover his original features—nor, most likely, an identity already dissolved into the string of roles he had played.

Corvo had no intention of prying into any of his companions' lives, least of all the former guard's. From their first meeting, the man had struck him as more machine than human. It was even quite possible he carried a good number of prostheses. After all, the myth of the human robot had come true less through machines becoming like us than through us becoming like them.

During the journey to the mouth of the bridge, Corvo reviewed new hypercoordinate files that only deepened his suspicions. He asked Aura where the data came from, but she gave him no straight answer. They were simply files that had reached the Sphere from many sources—some leaked by contacts inside the federations, others captured by agents in the field.

"The Sphere doesn't have its own data yet," she admitted. "That's exactly why we need you—to help us build the technology to get it."

But if the data were not theirs, why show them to him? Clearly they had noticed something strange as well. When the engineer shared his concerns, Aura chose to be frank:

"The federations hide plenty of things. A secret bridge, maybe—who knows. I don't put much stock in those rumors, but it costs nothing to look."

"I don't think there are routes in there," Corvo said, nodding at his display. It was obvious the federations were hiding things. Whoever managed to open the next bridge would reap the rewards of controlling it—and first claim to settle on the other side. Sooner

or later such discoveries came to light, and the interstellar pact required routes to be opened to competitors after a preferential period. Still, the federations held final authority over public use of the routes; they regulated traffic and granted permits. The Sphere had its permits—it was a powerful organization uniting a host of independent groups. Its relations with the federations were tense, but they could not refuse to tolerate this common enemy's activities. And Humeides, it seemed, had its permits too—or rather, the money to obtain them and to buy ships, something few could afford.

Near the origin and destination of every route stood a bifederal station that detected passing vessels and checked them against the database. If an unregistered ship tried to jump, nothing could stop it—short of a nuclear strike, reserved for wartime or vessels flagged as terrorist. The rest were logged and the violation broadcast to every system so they could be seized at the first opportunity.

The *Narval* had everything in order; no trouble was expected. Corvo already knew the protocol. Nothing could be left loose inside the ship, and the crew had to seal themselves into airtight sarcophagi. Once secured, the artificial gravity shut down and the navigation system switched to automatic, accelerating the vessel to its limit. When the precise coordinates were reached, a brutal thrust sent it spinning thousands of times over a span of minutes. In the moments before and after the jump, the surrounding space was shaken by turbulence fierce enough to destroy any body not fixed to the structure; the ship had to be hurled against those waves as though it were a single solid mass. Once it hit the exact point, the bridge was crossed in a flash—a deep, sudden sleep that swallowed the travelers no matter how hard they fought to stay awake.

3. THE DREAM OF EARTH

HE WOKE WITH the image of a vivid dream. He was in an old village house; around it grew a forest of deep greens and dew-covered leaves. At the back, a small lake lay hidden in the undergrowth; when he set foot on its shore, the lake became a boundless surface. Children were diving into the water from a boat against the orange glow of sunset. The lake, just before he opened his eyes, had turned into a lonely sea, its liquid horizon melting into the stars.

It took him a moment to realize where he was and to understand what that dark glass covering him could be. He remembered the moments before as if they had happened on some lost day in the past. He remained sunk in confusion until he noticed movement on the other side—blurred shapes dancing like lightless flames. He did not know how to open his hatch, so he waited for someone to remember him. At last, Daniel Acero's smiling face appeared.

"How long has it been?" Corvo asked.

"About twenty minutes since we got in the box. How do you feel?"

"Like I've slept a week. I even dreamed."

"Well, aren't you the lucky one!" Nezda called from the back.

Corvo, his head now poking out, looked at her in puzzlement. On his previous jump, he had felt the same daze, but without dreams.

"Some people dream occasionally," said Aura. "They're always vivid, intense dreams. I've never had them, and I've jumped many times."

"What was your dream about?" Nezda asked.

"Childhood things. A lake, the sea..."

"Earth dreams of water," Resa murmured.

Corvo, surprised, looked at the man who had spoken those enigmatic words with barely a movement of his lips.

"It's a fragment of a poem," the former guard explained. "Earth dreams of water and seeks it in the stars. Joel Vega."

The name struck the engineer's ears like a lash, but before he could ask, the piercing sound of an alarm cut him off.

"The bifederal station is very close," Acero announced. "They're waiting for us."

“We’ll have to do something,” Nezda said.

Corvo, unsettled by the turn of events, looked from one to the other.

“We bolt or we invite them in.”

The engineer understood they were mocking him, and that the decision had been made long ago. If they shot off now in the opposite direction, they would easily escape the range of the detectors. They had the advantage that stations around jump centers had to keep a prudent distance. Their real job was to stay alert to rescue ships that came out of hyperspace in bad shape, or to flag those with warrants against them. This time, the risky proximity of the patrols was a sign they had been warned of a possible arrival. They had probably already been detected and a contact was ready. But things in space were not so simple; the vast distances and the difficulty of any approach gave the advantage to those who fled. As soon as they launched with inhibitors active toward open space, the pursuing ships would lose their trail and have to fire off random volleys of waves to find them again.

At once, everyone strapped into their seats. Acero touched the panels and the alarms stopped; at that same instant, the *Narval* accelerated sharply. After the thrust, everything returned to calm.

Corvo knew they must be somewhere beyond Saturn, at a relatively clear point in space, twelve to twenty days from Earth—if it still existed. The distance had cast the real image of the blue planet into the hazy depths of his imagination. In his dreams, like the one he had just had after the jump, he often saw it as a lost, unrecoverable home. He feared that if he returned, the cumbersome, stifling reality of Earth would extinguish those consoling images. And yet he wanted to go back; in fact, it was one of the few sincere desires he still held, and it grew stronger with every kilometer they drew closer.

When they told him they were heading not for Earth but for Callisto, he felt an indefinable mixture of relief and disappointment. Though the Solar System had been widely explored, permanent missions were still barely drops in an ocean. On Callisto there was a small, discreet neutral outpost where the Sphere had everything needed to make their now-outlawed ship cease to exist: a full reset of

the controls, a replacement of the positioning and identity systems, and a change of appearance. The name, though, would remain—*Narval*, a name that appeared in no registry and was known to no one but its crew. Another advantage was Jupiter's moon being closer, though it would still take them several days to arrive.

The first thing he did once they were safely beyond any threat was to approach Resa. The name Joel Vega still echoed in his mind. He could not remember from where, but he was certain he knew it. A knowledge that, judging by the stab he had felt on hearing it, seemed to go far beyond something trivial. Resa said he did not know much more. According to him, Vega was merely a marginal writer whose only known publication was a thin volume of poems. He might still be alive; he was an elusive figure who had gone to some lengths to erase his traces from the world.

The engineer regretted not being closer to Earth, where he could connect to the network and dig for references to that name which had so unexpectedly emerged from the shadows of his memory. On these journeys, curiosity was a poor companion, especially when, as now, there were no control stations to communicate with. Although he had only been traveling through the sidereal vastness for a few weeks, he already felt the first pangs of anguish and rootlessness that gripped the lives of spacefarers. No doubt his long isolation in Gándor had something to do with it, though he had really lived through it as a kind of stupor—an episode that, once over, was settled like a fleeting incident that barely left traces for his future life. The journey, however, was beginning to wake him up.

He observed the members of the ISF and wondered how long they had been adrift in space, never setting foot on anything but artificial oases in the midst of rocky wastelands. In each of them he sensed a hidden abyss. It was evident in Resa, about whom one might ask whether he had finally lost all connection to any solid ground. Both Aura and Acero clung to an ideal, a mission whose fulfillment stood far above their sorrows. In Nezda there was something more—a hidden rage, or the shadow of a loss; and yet she did not seem driven by vengeance or personal satisfaction. Her commitment to the same ideal as her companions was plain to see.

But did she truly believe in it, or was it the refuge of a spirit cast out from the world?

When Corvo asked if she knew Joel Vega, she answered with a laugh that she had never read a poem in her life.

“Actions, not words, change things.”

“And after things change, will we stay silent?”

“Well, well! Turns out you’re a poet too.”

A few days later, the ship picked up an encrypted signal. They were near Callisto, and there was no news of the federations prowling nearby, though it was possible they were hiding in some crater. Officially, their presence around Jupiter was limited to the great base on the moon Europa—the third-largest extraterrestrial colony in the Solar System after Moon I and Mars.

The base they were heading for lay discreetly hidden in fractured terrain; it was barely visible from space, and its cosmodrome was just large enough to hold the *Narval*. Once on the ground, the scene could not have been more different from the bustle of Merga’s transports. Here there was only a small hangar, and inside it a handful of ships, some so battered they looked as if they could never have made it this far.

On the other side stood a square barracks used to service permanent or temporary residents. Comforts were scarce and operations simple. Given the tight space, sleeping quarters were shared, and the mess hall was something like a service-station cafeteria lost in an earthly desert. There was no choice but to spend long stretches there while repairs were carried out on the vehicles. A few men and women gathered there—station technicians and travelers who, once they had paid their fees, could stay without anyone asking questions.

One of them caught Corvo’s attention. He was a large man with a shaved head and a bulging nose. In his left socket sat an artificial globe that rotated inside the bone. This expressionless eye, which probably offered its owner nothing but shadows, contrasted with the liveliness of the other, which peered out from the darkness of the swollen folds of his eyelid.

“A lot of the people here are hiding, like us,” Acero whispered in his ear.

“The Federations don’t know about this place?”

“They might. Anyway, there are several like it all over the Solar System, even smaller. Once the swarm scatters, the queen loses control.”

On Earth, the adventures of all kinds of explorers were popular in the media, seekers of fortune who offered their exploits in documentaries or sold their discoveries to companies. Many dreamed of finding, in the vast unexplored terrain of the accessible systems, water and sources of wealth. Others delighted in displaying never-before-seen wonders, which those who came after them exploited to open tourist routes fit only for the very wealthy. Perhaps some of those gathered here were that kind of adventurer, capable of severing every protective tie and venturing into the unknown depths. But it was equally possible they were agents of some underground business, or even smugglers.

The engineer discreetly observed the man with the dead eye. He certainly did not look like some intrepid soul who had set out in search of knowledge or the beauty of the cosmos. He noticed the man lean slightly toward them and look their way, and guessed that what interested him was Nezda’s sensual profile. He was tempted to whisper to her that they were being watched, but did not feel familiar enough to do so. In any case, she surely noticed the movements of those around her better than anyone. No doubt she was used to standing out in these environments full of people worn down by the hardships of life beyond Earth.

When Aura joined them, she surveyed the place with a look of distaste and briefly reported what the mechanics had told her about the *Narval*.

“Is Resa in the workshops?” Corvo asked.

“Resa has left.”

A strained silence followed the curt reply. Clearly they were not going to give him more explanations. The mission of that chameleon of a man had ended there. With another face and another identity, he had departed to attend to matters that were none of Corvo’s business.

No one around looked like they belonged to any authority, but something in the atmosphere troubled the ISF members. A lone woman approached, meaning to strike up a conversation. The rules

of courtesy in those remote places dictated—almost as an obligation—that one not refuse human contact, especially if the person seeking it was alone. Esthir, as she said her name was, explained she was a biologist collecting data from various environments for experiments on adapting crops to extreme conditions. The rules, on the other hand, did not require that you give details about your presence in a place like this, so discretion was not badly received. Even so, they had their own story prepared, and Acero, with genuine warmth, replied that their reasons for traveling were purely commercial. Esthir and the *Narval's* pilot chatted amiably for a while about trivial matters. It seemed that, had they met with more time and better lodgings, they would have seized the chance to continue their talk elsewhere.

Corvo noticed that the man with the dead eye had gone. He looked around and felt the urge to step into the outer corridor, but Nezda stopped him.

“Want to see the view? I’ll come with you.”

Half the perimeter of the installation was enclosed by a continuous screen, but the views were not particularly interesting; all that could be made out outside was the rocky gloom of the valley.

“Everything all right?” the engineer asked.

“Nothing unusual. These places are dull, but we have no choice but to stop here.”

Corvo found Nezda’s overprotectiveness uncomfortable. It was obvious she did not trust his movements, but also that he depended entirely on her and her companions, and he told her so.

“I’m in your hands.”

The woman looked at him with indifference. The engineer went on with his confession.

“I have nowhere to go. No home, no family on Earth or anywhere else.”

Nezda caught the theatrical tone of those words at once. They might be true, but they did not express their owner’s real concerns; he was using them to be ironic about his situation.

“Of course you have somewhere to go: a federal prison.”

Beyond the irony, Nezda was curious about what drove this man. She saw him as someone who did not care about the future,

who had accepted the unknown only to escape confinement. She could not quite accept that he would help them solely to keep his end of the bargain, without the slightest involvement. But she knew nothing of his life, just as he knew nothing of hers, and neither seemed to need a friendly ear to hear their woes. They were both fleeing their history, each in their own way—Nezda clinging to an ideal, Corvo to the chance they had given him to survive.

The station clocks marked the start of night. They all followed the space time zone, though those who roamed the void often had their own habits. In a place as remote as Callisto, sunlight could barely separate day from night, and the base's lighting was constant; only the common areas for rest and work were turned off. A man with discreet personal-illumination glasses confirmed this had already happened.

They were about to head back to the mess hall when a sharp blast froze them in place. Corvo felt Nezda's hand grip his wrist, and an instant later everything went dark. She pulled him along, groping her way forward. From the back came the shout of someone asking something in a language they did not understand; other voices followed, and the noise of people running. His face was brushed by the beam of the small flashlight Nezda held in her free hand; with that help they tried to push through the corridor, hindered by people emerging mainly from the dormitories, coming to see what had happened. What alarmed them was not the darkness but the explosion, which was followed by a weaker one and then a hiss that died when all the gas was out.

In the intermittent flashes of the convulsing beam, Corvo watched in bewilderment as the straight walls seemed to curve. Someone tried to lift him, but had no more strength than he did. At some point the flashlight fell and lit up a useless corner. A flurry of chaotic blows sounded around him, farther and farther away. He felt himself being dragged; the windows had spun and threatened to collapse. He saw an impossible sky saturated with stars, and then nothing—until the light returned at full force. He flew, held aloft by a demented, paralyzing intoxication, down an endless corridor, blinded by headlights that fell alternately on his eyes.

They left him sprawled on a metal floor, his face pressed against a wall of the same material. He could see, but had no sense of seeing. He could hear, but every sound was a thick, lacerating murmur. He could not move, and felt the saliva dripping down his chin. He lay like that for what seemed an eternity. When he finally began to regain consciousness, the first thing he perceived was a cage, and in it, behind the bars, a blur of moving colors. He thought he was hallucinating; he could not identify the thing, and concluded it must be some aberrant creation of his mind. That delusion did not last long, and he soon realized it was a bird. A simple bird. He had not seen one in over two years.

The bird hopped indifferently among the bars. Now and then it landed on the edge of its narrow feeder and pecked at something. Corvo found himself wondering whether the animal was happy, then immediately thought the question was idiotic. As long as it had food, air, and water, the bird would not know the difference between an apartment on Earth and a space station millions of kilometers away. What, then, made humans so special that, even when they had everything they needed to survive, they always longed for something indefinable? Perhaps the bird needed something like that too—not the landscape you see or think, but the one that stretches along the flight with no other end. To fly for the sake of flying, with no pleasure but the fullness of muscles in motion, no limit but the body's own.

His vision began to clear, though he could barely move. After a while, he managed to wipe the drool from his chin. He was drained of energy; the smallest gesture took great effort. Then he noticed someone approaching. He saw an enormous man dressed in a gray, dusty suit. Where did that dust come from? He could not make it out; perhaps it was grease or some other kind of grime. The man brought his profile close to the cage and examined it with his dead eye—a black sphere that bulged from the eyelid and warped his face. Slowly, the figure turned toward him and looked at him with that face split in two. The mouth matched the imbalance: the half beneath the artificial eye was straight and tight; the other half smiled.

“Welcome to my ship. Sorry for the trouble, but it was the only way to bring you with me.”

Corvo tried to answer, but could only manage a stammer. The other man seemed amused by his helplessness.

“Don’t worry, it’ll pass soon,” he said, carefully changing the bird’s water.

“Where am I?” Corvo finally managed to ask.

The man pretended not to hear and spent a long while watching his pet; his look of relish was hidden on the other side of his mutilated profile. At last he turned to Corvo and cleared up his doubts.

“On my ship. Cúcera’s ship.”

And he left without another word.

The room was nothing more than a metal box. At one end lay the prisoner; at the other, the cage on a pedestal beside a wall full of small compartments. Corvo tried to move toward the bird to see it up close, but when he stretched out his arm he met a glass panel dividing the space. On his side there was nothing—only a window behind him through which he could see the stars. There was no trace now of any planet, which meant either that a long time had passed since the incident at the base, or that Cúcera had acted with extraordinary speed. He examined his cell and found a small ledge; he pulled it and unfolded a cot. He lay down utterly exhausted, yet unable to sleep. The moment he fixed his attention on a faint electrical hum, it swelled into a roar that filled all the space of his senses.

The bird’s presence was a ridiculous comfort compared to the company of the ISF. He felt a flash of rage at having lost that chance to be free, but he did not even have the strength for that, and resigned himself to the idea that perhaps his fate was to go bouncing from one prison to another. But who was holding him captive now? It seemed obvious the mercenary’s plan was to hand him over to one of the federations. If so, the bounty on his head must be worth the trouble. His only relief was the thought that they surely wanted him alive—at least for now.

After a while, Cúcera returned with food for both his prisoners.

“Now I have to feed two birds,” he said mockingly.

The engineer did not miss the chance to question him, but the man answered everything with cutting humor.

“I’m not paid to give you answers. And what they do with you is none of my concern,” he said, meaning to end it.

“Who pays you?” Corvo shouted in one last attempt to learn his fate, though he had little doubt what the answer would be.

Cúcera then decided to give him something for free—a small, unexpected gift. He brought his face close to Corvo’s with a sardonic grimace and exclaimed:

“Humeides!”

4. OLD EARTH

CÚCERA CALLED HIS bird Osiek. It was a goldfinch covered entirely in yellow, red, and blue edgings—no doubt a genetic modification. Its owner visited it several times a day and almost never paid attention to his other captive, whom he merely brought food and water.

Corvo found the surprising revelation about Humeides’ involvement so baffling that he refused to listen any further to this man whose dead gaze filled him with deep aversion. He sensed, moreover, that he would get no answers from him—only mockery.

A few days after leaving Callisto and halfway to Earth, the engineer had regained his strength. It was then that he truly began to turn over the riddle in which he found himself caught. Humeides? What did he have to do with that sect? As far as he knew, it was a Christian-inspired cult founded some decades ago by one Samuel Auger, a visionary who had presented himself as a messiah destined to lead his flock to a new world—the Eden-planet that God had created for them, the righteous and faithful. They were certainly trying to find stellar routes as well, but why did everyone want him? What was so special about him? Another matter was the means needed to finance such an enterprise, which did not seem to be a problem for a group deeply rooted among the financial elites. In that, they followed an old tradition shared by many similar groups: they preferred to preach among the rich and convince them they were the chosen ones, rather than venture into poor neighborhoods proclaiming a heavenly kingdom reachable only by paying an exorbitant fare.

Auger, as a pioneer, had once set out to explore space and was lost there forever. Since then, his followers called themselves Augerians and devoted themselves to reading their founder's writings under the guidance of their current leader, Peter Husa, who promised to take them to the New Earth supposedly discovered by their founder.

Besides Humeides, there were countless groups on old Earth promising similar things, but none had achieved their success and power. Most exploited masses of people without resources, promising them—in lieu of a real journey—that a supernatural ship would come to carry them away, them specifically, from that exhausted planet. In times of crisis, these movements grew like wildfire. But how long had they been in crisis? For as long as he could remember, Corvo had never stopped hearing that the end was near and that finding a new world was urgent. What they had found, however, were inhospitable worlds that could barely shelter a few thousand people canned inside sealed stations. Earth, meanwhile, kept on bearing billions of human beings with stubborn resilience.

The image of a suffocating world was belied from space, where the planet's blue shone with the same serenity as always. As they drew closer, Corvo's anticipation grew. His memories, turned during his captivity into inert images, now revived and flooded his empty hours. At last he could see the globe in the distance from his window. Osiek was restless too, hopping from one side of the cage to the other. The bird's agitation was noticed by Cúcera, who entered the room to observe his pet. Whenever he did, he made faces meant to be affectionate but which came out grotesque. Without changing his expression, he looked at his prize and announced they were about to dock with Humeides' orbital station. This surprised the engineer, who knew very well that licenses for fixed installations around Earth were not granted to just anyone—especially since both federations had spent billions cleaning up space debris whose damage had become unbearable for both.

Docking was a highly automated maneuver; one only had to specify the standards involved and watch that the machines did exactly what they were told. After an approach lasting several minutes, Cúcera's ship slotted precisely into a receiving platform. Just an

instant later came a gravitational shift; Corvo and Osiek rose a few centimeters and fell softly under the new weight provided by the larger installation. The electrical hum ceased, and the bird fluttered across its cage to celebrate the success of the maneuver.

The sound of a sliding panel indicated that the screen confining Corvo had been withdrawn. On the other side stood Cúcera with a small man dressed in a sober gray tunic, on whose chest shone the symbol of Humeides—the H over the cross. The man smiled amiably and introduced himself as *nio* Cirodde, brother of the Augerian order.

“Welcome to our home, Mr. Corvo. I am very sorry for the trouble of your journey here.”

Trouble? The engineer was stunned by the cynicism of those words.

“I hope Mr. Cucevic treated you courteously.”

“Of course. He only drugged me and locked me in this lovely cell,” Corvo said dryly.

Cúcera could barely suppress a laugh, but Cirodde seemed indifferent to the attitudes of both and went on playing the gracious host.

“Come with me. We will be leaving for Earth shortly; they are expecting us there.”

They advanced along a circular corridor apparently free of any surveillance device, though Corvo had no doubt they were monitoring his every move. They left him in a small room decorated as austere as a parish classroom; the furniture was wooden, and numerous portraits covered the walls. On the table, several synthetic sheets displayed Humeides publicity. With a touch, the contents changed to show a succession of familiar smiles and lush gardens. After a brief wait, a waitress dressed in the gray and red uniform of the initiates brought him coffee and pastries. Did they know that was the drink he always had, or was it a coincidence? He did not want to think about what else they might know. If, as was to be expected, they had good contacts in government intelligence agencies, they would be aware of his entire history.

He drank the coffee while trying to look away from the images surrounding him. There was Peter Husa, a square-jawed figure he

had seen before on some website, and Samuel Auger, whose unsettling face dominated the room. The founder's image was veiled by a filter that failed to hide the wrinkles around his eyes and ears, betraying artificially rejuvenated skin—perhaps the product of a late or cheap *Neogesta*.

Fortunately, they did not leave him long under those gazes. Cirodde came for him again and led him to the cabin of a small shuttle. Once they had separated from the station, the hazy arc of the Earth's sphere soon appeared in the window. Before long, Corvo could make out the outline of the Mediterranean. They left the sea surfaces behind and entered the geometry of browns, ochres, and greens that covered the habitable ground. Their destination was an immense city crossed by long avenues flanked by skyscrapers. Around it the suburbs stretched endlessly—cramped to the south, broader and dotted with forest to the north. They flew in that direction until they touched down softly at a cosmodrome surrounded by several hectares of lawn.

After so long, he was finally on Earth. He was anxious about the effect of breathing natural air again—then realized he was already doing it; the doors were open. A strange vertigo paralyzed him, and he had to force his muscles to start walking. He stepped out with an absurd fear that at any moment gravity would fail and his feet would lift off. But there was nothing to fear. When at last he stood in the open air, he shielded his eyes with his arm. He felt disoriented, as if he had spent months locked in a cave. The light seemed excessive; it came from everywhere and everything reflected it. No dome could imitate this.

Wherever he looked, there was nothing but a green surface surrounded by a thin strip of trees far in the distance. They took him in a simple flying cart to the village hidden beyond that edge. In the city of Humeides there was nothing like a traditional church; everything was blocks symmetrically arranged around a great white sphere whose lower half lay underground. That was the temple, but they did not head there—rather toward a distant area on the outskirts.

At the doors of a building with tinted glass stood some initiates in the uniform he already knew, but also people dressed in street clothes. Most were young and gathered in lively groups with the air

of students just out of class—if this was a university complex and not a school, because in the lobby there was a group of children between six and eleven years old, patiently guided by their instructors.

“That is the group you will be working with,” Cirodde whispered.

The engineer snapped out of his reverie.

“You went looking for me millions of kilometers away so I could teach children?”

“No,” the Augerian smiled. “You will participate with them in an... activity.”

However much he tried to appear cordial, the man’s smile oozed perversion. But more perverse still seemed the intentions Corvo sensed behind it all. What did they mean to do with those children?

There was no further conversation. Cirodde left with his smile stitched beneath his nose, and Corvo was installed in a room not much better than his cell in Gándor—but it had something he had lacked on the satellite: a window showing the real landscape of a path disappearing among the trees.

The next day, they came for him very early. They gave him just enough time to wash and handed him a plain uniform without insignia. For the first time, Cirodde showed a manner that made clear they had not paid for this kidnapping so the engineer could refuse to cooperate. Like it or not, they were going to use him. The *nio*, between feigned laments, made him see how unpleasant it would be to use force. There would be moments when they would have to take control of his will; if he cooperated, they would do it very carefully and leave no lasting damage.

Faced with those warnings, his first impulse was to run, but there was no way out. He was aware they would use extremely subtle and effective means to watch and hold him—force fields, most likely, and some form of biological tracking. All he could do was wait and see what kind of madness this group had planned.

He was led to a circular classroom where a group of fifteen children waited—the same ones he had seen the day before. With them was a young woman who introduced herself as *fei* Herina. From her more fitted clothes and the bows she made to Cirodde, it was clear the *fei* were a rank below the *nio*. The engineer wondered whether he had been assigned a rank of his own. Prisoner, perhaps?

“Welcome to the talent group, Mr. Corvo,” said Herina with a smile.

The children looked at him in surprise, but none spoke; they fell silent out of shyness in the presence of a high-ranking figure. When Cirodde left, everyone relaxed and there were giggles and whispers. With gentle but firm manners, the instructor ordered the chorus of young voices to welcome the new student, and they invited him to sit in the center of the group as one of them.

The situation could not have been more bizarre. The engineer thought they were playing a joke on him, but when the light went out and a vault full of luminous points was projected above their heads, that thought vanished and he began to guess what was happening.

“Do you remember?” Herina asked. “Does anyone see the perpendicular lines between the empty spaces?”

“I see the star tree,” said a girl.

“Very good, Cleo. Does anyone see anything else?”

What they were looking at was a star map—a tiny fragment of the kind used by stellar-route search teams. There was the basic data; little else needed adding except some more advanced data types and a complexity millions of times greater than this children’s sample. In reality, engineers like Corvo did not work with drawings; they only had them as reference. It was the machines that processed and searched; their job was to design searches, input data, and analyze results. Even so, any engineer could readily interpret far more complete maps. They could recognize the already-traced outline of a partial or total route, as well as many other things. What they could not do was find those things by looking at a raw map. And that was precisely what they intended to do here with these children.

“Perhaps our new classmate is seeing something,” Herina suggested.

“I don’t see anything. Just pretty little lights,” Corvo replied.

He was annoyed at being treated like a child, but he quickly checked his irritation when he saw the astonished looks his classmates gave him.

A tangle of sinuous lines appeared over the map. Hidden among them was a straight path. It was the recreation of a stellar route; they wanted to teach the children to recognize them. When the

instructor asked those who saw it to raise their hands, everyone did—except Corvo.

“You don’t see it?”

“See what?” the engineer pretended.

“And now?”

The lines vanished, then the stars. In their place appeared another map. Corvo recognized it instantly: a schematic drawing of the Alpha Bridge.

“There’s a dolphin in that quadrant,” he said, looking at Cleo and winking.

What were they after with this game? They—whoever was watching at that moment—knew perfectly well that he was familiar with those coordinates, but he would never have been able to find them on a virgin map. Neither could he nor anyone else, unless one believed the tale of Laura Deleda, the daughter of the famous scientist whose calculations had served to find precisely that route—the first. Was that what they were looking for: children with supernatural powers?

The map changed again and returned to a simple drawing like the first. One of the younger students pointed above his head and said timidly:

“That star is symmetrical.”

Corvo, who until then had barely paid attention, looked and confirmed the boy was right. It was a very simple symmetry, detectable at a glance—provided one was an expert engineer. That a child of barely seven could recognize it left him stunned.

“Can you follow it?” Herina asked.

The boy shook his head. His instructor came over and stroked his hair affectionately. Finding symmetries was the first step toward finding routes, but it was not so easy on a real map; one had to detect thousands of nodes and then link them and interpret the results—and that was truly an inhuman task. Corvo thought that, possibly, the child was gifted, but nothing more.

There were no more surprises in that day’s session. In the afternoon they wanted to show him what daily life was like in the citadel, and from the first moment he had the impression that everyone was performing a play for him. They let him walk freely, and he sought

an environment not so tainted by that atmosphere of unreality. He reached a tree-lined boundary around which lay numerous vegetable gardens where the followers worked with their own hands.

“We work for the community,” they told him, while in the distance chanting could be heard.

Everything suggested the presence of God. The songs praised Him, and the symbols were a schematic combination of recent logos with old Christian motifs, revealing the group’s lineage. The only figures depicted, as he had already seen on the orbital station, were the prominent members of the sect, whose portraits hung at the entrance of every building.

One day was enough to conclude that this was a nightmare world. In Gándor he had been locked up, but at least they left his mind in peace. In his free time, he could do nothing or curse every deity aloud. No one listened; no one cared. Here it was not even possible to think against the prevailing faith. The only option was to believe—and to do so sincerely in order to survive in an environment constantly inspected by a surveillance protocol that monitored every action and every word for the slightest trace of impiety.

But what did they expect from him? Certainly not a conversion. Perhaps they thought they could impress him with the happiness they believed they had achieved, in which they innocently lived—at least on the surface they showed him. Or perhaps they wanted him to see that his person was insignificant compared to the future world that was coming, which justified his kidnapping and the use they intended to make of his skills.

Over the following days, the meetings with the group of children continued. Each time, different maps were projected and they were asked about the figures hidden within. Some saw everything quickly; others had difficulty and, for that reason, did not return. Where did they bring them from, and where did they take them? At first, the engineer assumed they were children of Humeides members, but after a few days, when two of the children were replaced, he realized the newcomers—no older than eight—clearly came from outside. What family would lend their children to this group? The answer was obvious: one that did not exist, in the case of orphans, or one poor enough to hire out their offspring for a good wage.

They were recruiting talent in the most wretched neighborhoods; they took advantage of the fact that the qualities they sought were not acquired in any school—they were innate. All that had to be done was awaken and train them.

He soon saw clearly that they intended to form a team of prodigies. What some did not see, others would, and together they would gradually piece together possible routes. To Corvo, as an expert in precisely that field, such a project seemed absurd. He began to doubt that these people had the slightest idea of what the calculations they wanted to do by sight actually entailed. The myth of Deleda's daughter held that she had the gift of seeing, in the density of spatial coordinates represented on a vault, geometries that unknowingly betrayed the traces of possible routes. Without that ability, the mystery-seekers argued, it would have been impossible—or a fabulous coincidence—for her father to have found Alpha with the technology of his era. But that coincidence, however extraordinary, was not impossible, and it did not authorize anyone to grant supernatural powers to anyone—much less, as some pseudoscientists supposed, an intuition so extraordinary that some took it for telepathy.

After two weeks of continuous visits to the classroom, Corvo had definitively abandoned his ironic attitude. He began to take an interest in his classmates and to answer their questions. In the simplest language he could find, he taught them to identify stellar objects, systems, relationships, and many other things. Even so, he knew they did not want him there for that. There was no shortage of instructors who could guide the children; Herina herself had fairly advanced knowledge, as he discovered to his surprise.

One afternoon they informed him that the next day he would not attend class; they asked him to stay in his room and rest. He accepted the unexpected order reluctantly, and his desire to break through the imposed barriers flared up. The landscape they were denying him was not the poisonous desert of Gándor but the breathable horizon of Earth. This deprivation unleashed in him a restlessness he tried to counter with meditation, but the events of recent weeks tangled in his mind and kept him from rest. He thought then of the ISF members and of Nezda, and found himself

imagining how she might have behaved as a child before the projections Humeides showed its students. No doubt she would not have been so disciplined; she would have wanted at all costs to know how to reach the stars. But that was not possible without first looking up and studying them. In the end, it was those who devoted themselves to watching and counting stars—as a boy who wanted to learn to see symmetries had told him—who opened those paths.

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